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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PROP](#) [KDEM](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: LOCAL ELECTIONS IN MOROCCO: LOCAL DECISIONS, BUT A
REFERENDUM ON NATIONAL POLITICS (C-NE9-00557)

REF: A. STATE 026706
[B](#). RABAT 0485
[C](#). RABAT 0473

Classified By: CDA Robert P. Jackson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (U) Summary: The campaign for June 12th local council elections kicked off June 30, following the closure of candidate lists the day before. Despite the limited and limiting window for campaigning, it still took a few days to get the campaign off the ground. There have been lively rallies in major cities, flyers all over and door-to-door campaigning.

[2](#). (C) These are elections of proximity for almost 30,000 seats in more than 1,500 town and rural communal councils. The victors will also elect among themselves, council presidents, who function as mayors, provincial and regional councils, and one-third of the members of the upper house of Parliament. Corruption, opaque governance, unresponsive political parties, and local decision-making dominated by the Palace and its central administration have left many voters disaffected. Turnout in recent elections has been dropping and will be a key indicator as will the number of protest votes.

[3](#). (SBU) We expect the election to be transparent. Local contests frequently will be decided on the basis of the popularity of individual candidates, not necessarily on the political party. One key factor, however, will be the performance of the Palace-favored Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), which already pulled off a major feat by registering over 16,000 candidates, the most of any party. Its performance will be measured against the Prime Minister's Istiqlal (Independence) party, which registered the second most candidates and the pro-Islamic Party of Justice and Development (PJD), third in candidates, and up to 30 other parties. A clear result could mean a change in the ruling coalition or affect an expected cabinet reshuffle. This cable responds to questions posed in Ref A (C-NE9-00557). End Summary.

Communal Elections: "All Politics Are Local"

[4](#). (U) According to the Government of Morocco (GOM), 130,223 candidates, including over 20,000 women, will compete for 27,795 seats on 1,503 local councils in elections being held across Morocco and in Western Sahara (under Moroccan administration) on June 12. The commune is the smallest political entity within the Moroccan political system (equivalent to a town or borough). Elections at this level determine leaders responsible for local services, such as water, electricity, sanitation, public transportation, and economic development. Mechanically, most communal-level

politicians are drawn from party lists. Individuals vote for political parties, not candidates, and then, depending on the proportion of votes, the political parties draw from their party lists to fill their apportioned communal seats. However, a minority of seats is filled by direct election of candidates, i.e., you know exactly for whom you are voting. These are called uninominal districts. Communal council members serve six-year terms.

Cascading Election Process

¶5. (C) Communal elections have an added importance, often lost on most voters, in that they serve as the first step in chain of indirect elections that fill successively higher regional seats of government all the way up to one third of the seats in the parliament's upper house, the Chamber of Counselors. Candidates that win seats on communal councils, in turn, act as the voters for all of the other higher follow-on indirect elections. The communal council members first elect communal council presidents, a district president (responsible for a U.S.-equivalent sub-country-size entity). Next, communal council members elect provincial council presidents (responsible for one of 45 roughly U.S. county-size equivalents), followed by the selection of regional council presidents (responsible for the equivalent of 16 roughly U.S. state-size entities). This cascade of indirect elections ends with the selection of Chamber of Counselors members. All of these indirect elections will take place successively, and largely out of the public eye, between June and November 2009. (Comment: This indirect election process is publicly recognized as an opaque and frequently corrupt process, and contributes to some of the

widely held voter disaffection. End Comment.)

A Turnout Litmus Test -- Shaped by All the King's Men

¶6. (C) Apart from the selection of local bureaucrats, the communal elections are viewed by many in the Moroccan public, media, and political structure as a litmus test for the health of Morocco's evolving democratic system. Plagued by corruption and vote buying since their inception in 1960, Moroccan elections have recently suffered low and declining levels of participation. The 2007 legislative elections witnessed an ignominious 37 percent level of participation, accompanied by high rates of vote spoiling. The last communal elections in 2003 registered a 54 percent voter participation rate, down from 75 percent in the same contests in 1997. (Note: Communal elections tend to attract higher rates of participation than legislative elections because they are perceived to have direct/local consequences for voters. End Note.) We believe that any improvement over the last communal elections in terms of voter participation, i.e., over 54 percent, will be seen as a success; between 53 and 40 percent a disappointment; and below 40 percent as a sign of a continuation of a downward trend in the lack of confidence in the political establishment.

¶7. (SBU) Ministry of Interior (MOI) efforts to thwart another low-voter turnout appear to reflect Government, and perhaps Palace, concern. In January and February 2009, the MOI scrubbed voter registration lists, adding 1.64 million voters but removing over 3.63 million voters who had moved, died, or were otherwise found to be unverifiable, to decrease the denominator of the voter percentage participation calculation to approximately 13.3 million voters. (Note: The population of Morocco is approximately 34 million. End Note.) Embassy Officers also noted earlier than normal commencement of the government's "get out the vote" media blitz in April, consisting of an MOI website, TV, and radio spots. In a separate media campaign launched in January, MOI officials urged political parties to prepare and voters to elect competent communal officials in preparation for future implementation of the government's decentralization plan

called for by King Mohammed VI.

18. (SBU) More menacingly, the MOI in mid-January shut down six websites of the al-Adl Wal Ihsan (AWI) or the Justice and Good Works Organization -- an unregistered Islamist political association estimated to have over one million adherents in Morocco -- for several months. Embassy officers heard from numerous political contacts, and the press speculated, that the shut down was partly motivated by AWI calls on its websites for Moroccans not to participate in the communal elections. The Palace may also have decided to support designated seats for women -- for which the USG had pushed (Refs B and C) -- in the local elections as a means to increase interest and boost turnout.

19. (SBU) Apart from the widespread perception of corruption in politics and a disaffection with political parties, which are still perceived as opaque, self-absorbed, and unresponsive to voters, public awareness that elected officials lack real power compared to Palace and MOI-appointed officials also drags down voter participation. Morocco's government, at the regional level and below, functions within a bifurcated system with two separate, but mutually engaged, hierarchical chains-of-authority: one elected through the cascade system, described above, and the other appointed by the Palace and/or MOI. Officials within the MOI structure consist of Palace-appointed Walis (heads of regions); Governors (heads of provinces/prefectures); and MOI-appointed Pashas-or of lesser stature Caids) (heads of districts); and Caids (heads of communes). While the elected chain is responsible for civil and regulatory functions, the royal/MOI chain is more powerful because it maintains budget and security authority at every level of government --* &So why vote?,8 runs the logic of many voters.

Transparency

110. (U) The Consultative Council on Human Rights (CCDH) has been put in charge of electoral observation, building on its success in the observation of the 2007 parliamentary elections. It invited domestic observers and has certified approximately 300 observers from 70 civil society organizations, in addition to 20 CCDH-fielded observers. Each observer is expected to cover about five polling stations in regions across the country. (Note: This will be

only a small sample. They will use 38,248 voting stations for this election, and approximately 2,800 observed the 2007 legislative election. End Note.) Local elections tend to attract less observation support than legislative elections, according to CCDH.

111. (SBU) The USG, through the National Democratic Institute, in cooperation with the GOM, has trained numerous poll watchers from political parties for this election, and they will be the first line and most effective form of monitoring and control. The Embassy plans to field 14 roving observer teams on June 12 to gauge atmospherics and watch for any signs of voting irregularities. (Comment: With pressure to increase voter participation, and a history of vote buying, we hope that transparency gains made in the September 2007 legislative elections can be at least be maintained. End Comment.)

112. (SBU) According to Moroccan law, the 32-odd registered political parties in Morocco can only campaign for two weeks prior to the election. The GOM provides official funds to each registered party for campaigning during this period. The GOM provides 150 million dirhams (approximately USD 18.3 million) for each party and, for the first time in this election, an additional 10 million dirhams (approximately USD 1.2 million) per party to fund women's campaigns.

Party Politics: PAM Emerging

¶13. (SBU) While the introduction of more women into politics is a new and welcome event, most of our political contacts believe that it will not significantly alter the political landscape in terms of party politics. Our contacts in the International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute are telling us that Islamist-inspired Party of Justice and Development (PJD) and the newly emergent Party of Modernity and Authenticity (PAM) will likely reap more of a "female bounce" than other parties, but this factor will not tip the scales significantly as all parties will pick up female representation.

¶14. (SBU) The biggest potential change in Morocco's political field could come potentially from the PAM. The PAM was founded by Fouad Ali El Himma, an intimate of the King, and after just over a year, leads the biggest political bloc in Parliament. More than a month before the start of the campaign, PAM leaders criss-crossed the country on "informational tours," while other parties largely stayed home, deterred by strict laws against early campaigning. At the local level, PAM is outpacing its rivals with the speed in which its party caravans traverse the country and in its apparent ability to recruit the most wealthy, influential, or connected independent candidates (or those from other parties). While all parties appear to be engaged in this strategic "head hunting" exercise, largely supplanting the need for parties to articulate discernible platforms, PAM seems to be doing it the best. It managed the extraordinary feat of registering 16,793 candidates, the largest of any party, followed by Prime Minister El Fassi's Istiqlal party with some 15,681 candidates and the Islamic-referent PJD, with 8,870 candidates. The PJD has said it would run in only 40 percent of districts, due to its limited presence in rural areas. Approximately 56 percent of candidates have at least high school diplomas, which represents an improvement over previous elections. Areas of key contests include the Western Sahara, where the PAM is challenging the formidable Istiqlal party political machine led by the Er Rachid Family, and Fes, where the battle is between Istiqlal, with its populist mayor Hamid Chabat, and the PJD.

¶15. (SBU) Comment: The upcoming communal elections in Morocco will send a strong signal nationally and internationally on whether Moroccans, in general, still attach importance to political life after the previous low turnouts registered in the 2002 and 2007 legislative and the 2003 communal elections. Low turnout will reflect a widespread absence of trust and confidence in the elected structure and political parties, but not necessarily the monarchy. It will also reflect badly on the Prime Minister. However, high turnout will be judged by which party does well, and could benefit the newly formed PAM and give a boost to de facto head El Himma for shaking up "politics as usual" in Morocco. End Comment.

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